"Challenges to Governments and to Governance"

Notes for Remarks

by

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to

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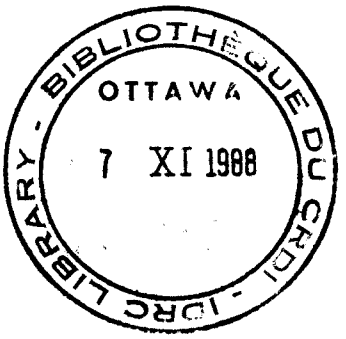

My invitation from the organizers of this conference suggested that I talk to you about change. At this moment, only hours following my return to Ottawa after a trip that took me around the world, I have a sense that the only kind of change I'm familiar with is from one airplane to another in crowded airports.

In any event, here at Montebello, in this province of Canada, which is French-speaking, everyone is familiar with the statement popularly attributed to a dozen or more French intellectuals: "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." One doesn't have to be a Québécois to have encountered those words. Members of the electorate in our multi-party democracies often echo the same sentiment when they find that a government they have elected quickly assumes a striking resemblance to the one they had just defeated.

An irony of human nature is the capacity of the species to adapt to change even while denying the existence of change. In my experience, bureaucrats are especially good at that.

In fairness, it is hard for anyone not to assume that posture. As these lovely late-summer days of September roll by, for example, we recall with equanimity events of Septembers past which in some instances indicate extraordinary change, and others which simply confirm that life goes on as usual. In the latter

category is the realization that this month is the centennial of the patent by George Eastman of the world's first hand-held roll-film camera; since then, cameras have become smaller and more sophisticated, but the basic principle of a hand-held, roll-film technology remains valid. On a lighter note, this is the 25th anniversary of the first concert of the Rolling Stones; to rock fans, that may be a bit of a jolt, but the Rolling Stones remain basically unchanged - give or take Brian Jones on lead guitar. By contrast, 50 years ago this month the world's then largest ocean liner, The Queen Elizabeth, was launched. Long since, not only has that vessel met its final resting place in Hong Kong harbour, but so has passed the entire era of scheduled sea transport of passengers. The golden age on the North Atlantic of the late 50s and the early 60s with that multitude of modern luxury vessels - The Queen Elizabeth II, The United States, The Leonardo da Vinci, The France, the white Empress fleet of Canadian Pacific Steamship Lines - that era collapsed and disappeared in less than a decade as the long distance jet aircraft came of age and absolutely revolutionized the transport industry.

As each one of us flies across oceans in jet aircraft, accomplishing in a fewer number of hours than the number of days required to make the same journeys just 25 years ago, we think little of it. No more than our acceptance of a roll-film camera

in our briefcase, not that much different than the original model.

However we regard these phenomena, we do ourselves a disservice if we fail to acknowledge that technology not only changes much more rapidly than does social organization, but it is technology that forces social change. Without any question, technology is the greatest change agent in the history of humankind - from the first application of flint against stone to ignite fuel, from the shaping of a plough to introduce the practice of sedentary agriculture, through the steam engine, the wireless, and the electric lamp, to the manufacture of pharmaceutical marvels to preserve human life and the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction to destroy it. Societies may resist the introduction of new technologies, but in that struggle disequilibria evolve which can be more destabilizing than the changes wrought by the new technology.

There is still another element of change in this sequence. It is science. Sometime this century, science irreversibly moved ahead of technology as the initial ingredient in the duality. No longer does technology precede the scientific understanding of the underlying concept, as was the case for millennia. The principle of the lever followed by centuries its initial applications in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates. Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell, arguably two of the most

prolific innovators of all time, were inventors, not scientists. Today's technologies, without exception, are the application of scientific discoveries first evolved in laboratories, not in workshops. The interval between discovery and use is diminishing rapidly even as the uses become more and more exotic.

How rapidly are these events changing our lives? From day to day it is difficult to realize. Let me help you remember some of them. If you will forgive the implicit egotism, I'll use my own lifetime as the envelope of measurement. In some 60 years we have become accustomed to electro-cardiography, cellophane, radio-telescopes, antibiotics, colour photography, nylon, computers, recombinant DNA, lunar probes, television, VCRs, nuclear power reactors, oral contraceptives - the list seems endless, but the point, I hope, is made.

For some of you, geography and colonial indifference combined to squeeze the impact of those events into a period of less than 30 years. Have there been any six decades in recorded history of equal technological ferment? Obviously not. Have earlier technological innovations led to greater social adjustment? I suggest yes, - so far. The wheel and axle, the knife, pipes and ducts, moveable type, gunpowder - these changed the way that human beings pursued their livelihoods and organized their communities far more than have bio-technologies

or computers or rockets. Yet we all know that the potential for change in the form of massive destruction is greater today than at any time in history.

Equally important for us is to recognize that what has changed least of all in the past 300 years is the form of government, and the fact that in this planetary age, governments continue to function much as they have for centuries. It matters not whether one observes the structure of government in Moscow - driven by Marxist principle, in Westminster - the model of responsible government, in New Delhi - where a particular form of republicanism is practiced, or Dar-es-Salaam - the home of the Ujamaa movement. In each there will be a pyramidical administrative framework. In each there will be, by whatever name, a collection of functional units or ministries called transport and finance and education and foreign affairs. And in each capital there will be some mechanism, always inadequate, to coordinate and make more effective these singular units.

Government is much more than structure, of course, yet the procedures demanded by structure are effectively limited to a minimum of variations. A command and control structure limits managerial flexibility, and effectively denies innovative problem solving. We live in an age of a single biosphere, of a global economy, and of a surging population, yet we govern ourselves

today as we have for 300 years. Adequate as were these techniques in the age of Locke or Rousseau, their ineffectiveness in the face of nuclear holocaust, of militant terrorism, of the pandemic of AIDS, and of worldwide rising social expectations is well known to each one of you. Yet we're not sure why those techniques are now inadequate, even as we realize that we'd better find out soon because the present momentum of change is irreversible and, in the nuclear age, error can be irremedial.

One of the reasons why governance seems now to be so irrelevant to the quantum and kind of problems faced in all our societies really has little to do with the private sector/public sector division of economic theory and IMF theology now so prevalent. With the possible exceptions of Albania and North Korea (about each of which I know absolutely nothing and so can only guess) there is not a country in the world that does not practice some form of mixed economy no matter how ideologically pure in one direction or another is the leadership. The reasons for irrelevance, I submit, may well be rooted in our failure as governors to reflect accurately the physical and natural world in which we live. This schism is much more profound than it first appears. Let me endeavour to explain.

Those giants of political and economic constructionism

to whom we have all owed so much for hundreds of years, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx, were either contemporaries or inheritors of the period of brilliant scientific accomplishment marked most significantly by the work of Sir Isaac Newton. Newton's "Principia", published in 1687, was the most far-reaching and definitive account of the natural order of things in the history of humankind. His theories built upon the work of Copernicus and Galileo, and extended the principles of universality and consistency to all physical behaviour. The laws of nature, wrote Newton, were quantifiable, were subject to measurement and to arithmetic explanation. This concept led naturally to the presumption that the universe was predictable.

Following on the Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century, political scientists like Locke and Rousseau were given the opportunity to adopt a similar concept to the social order. As described by Rushworth M. Kidder, "the Newtonian ideas spilled over into social and political consciousness. After all, if the physical laws of the universe were discoverable, why should not social and political laws also be subject to experimentation and proof." And so did intellectuals believe this to be the case. The result, according to historian Daniel J. Kevles, was "a set of social and political ideas [that] were then used as weapons and corrosives to overthrow monarchies, to create democracies,

and to celebrate the natural rights of man. There is, in short, a symbiotic and explosive relationship between the scientific revolution of Newtonianism and the social and political developments of the 18th century."

Not all the world underwent revolution in the 18th century, of course, nor did the revolutionaries themselves deem it necessary to extend to all peoples these social and political manifestations of the principles of scientific universality. Those of you from recently liberated former colonies are all too aware of this schizophrenic phenomenon. It was not always political imperialism that stood in the way, however. Theological intransigence formed barriers of ignorance as enduring and impenetrable as any in history. And with profound implications on the scientific, economic and political development of the societies affected. A good example was the Papal Inquisition of Galileo Galilei.

As Bronowski has written: "The effect of the trial and of the imprisonment [of Galileo] was to put a total stop to the scientific tradition in the Mediterranean. From now on, the Scientific Revolution moved to Northern Europe. Galileo died, still a prisoner in his house, in 1642. On Christmas Day of the same year in England, Isaac Newton was born."

One common attribute, however, appealing to scientists, to religious leaders, and to secular politicians almost everywhere was orderliness or tidiness. Browning reflected the belief of every monotheistic religion when he wrote "God's in His heaven, All's right with the world!" Governments came to be organized as universities had been for centuries, in carefully constructed compartments. The independent pursuit of specific scientific disciplines, the parallel tracks of a dozen or so ministries of government, the presence of impermeable jurisdictional membranes to separate the activities of otherwise overlapping actors - this was order. So was the expectation that it could all fit together if only the process was well designed. The model was available and well-tested - the pyramidical command and control structure of the military. Responsibility upward, authority downward. Specialists proliferated; middle-managers prospered. Enterprises of all kinds adopted the model; government, church, business. In eastern societies where cultural and religious attitudes and practices were much different, many of these western principles of governance and constructs of organization were nevertheless either introduced or consolidated.

And they seemed to work. Perhaps not always efficiently, but generally effectively. Variations there were from place to place and time to time: federal systems and

unitary systems, monarchies and republics, responsible governments and those with separation of powers. But the universal popularity of the British TV series, "Yes, Minister", is evidence of the familiarity of it all. Bureaucracy had become as universal, and some might argue as predictable, as Newton's physical principles.

But as each one of us knows, problems in recent years have become more complex, populaces more demanding, economic progress more frustrating, and governments less effective. Bit by bit, some governments, but by no means all, have come to realize that the several elements of governance - planning, problem-solving, management - can no longer be carried out in micro fashion, disconnected one from the other or within the various elements. Evidence of the need for fresh responses is widespread, so are the explanations of those needs. We live, after all, in an information age, a planetary age, a nuclear age, an age of rising social expectations. Yet it is the commercial sector, not the governmental sector, that has reformed itself most assertively. That organizational phenomenon, the multi-national enterprise, has aroused immense interest in governments everywhere. All too often, however, the aim of government has not been to emulate the flexibility and efficiency of the MNE - but instead to regulate and to tax it. All too often still, the immense potential of the new communications and information-

processing technologies are looked upon by government as a menace or a challenge rather than as an expeditor and facilitator. In an era when money centres and stock exchanges are functioning around the clock and around the world, when foreign currencies of a value of many billions of U.S. dollars are traded in every 24 hour period, the most common form of intra-government communications is by typewritten page, often hand-carried.

It is not the form of the communication that is so distressing, however, it is the conceptual framework into which it fits. That framework, Harlan Cleveland has written, includes "an economics based on scarcity, governance based on secrecy, laws based on ownership, management based on hierarchy." Each one of these concepts, states Cleveland, needs to be re-addressed. One of the reasons, of course, is that the final years of the 20th century are merging and re-shaping all that we have hitherto regarded as separate and finite. As physicians are recognizing the value of holistic medicine, as some religious leaders are preaching ecumenism, so must governors better relate and connect seemingly disparate issues and phenomena.

Should this be surprising? No, it should not. But it will be a surprise if we refuse to accept the impact of Newton on political science and political economy, and if we assume that Newtonian principles remain correct. If, on the other hand, we

accept the influence of the physical world upon our societal structures, those structures will have to adjust to reflect reality or prove increasingly to be inconsequential.

It is not a coincidence that the modern challenges to government began to emerge as Max Planck and Albert Einstein revealed the shortcomings of Newton's principles of universal determinism. The first, with his quantum theory, and the second, with his theory of relativity, ushered in the modern age of physics. What was once orderly, predictable, and subject to classification had now been shown to be none of these. In the age of quantum mechanics, lack of clarity is the norm, probability has replaced certainty, and tolerance for the vaguely understood has become a necessity.

These changes in theory have profound implications, yet to date their impact upon governance has attracted much more attention from physical scientists than from political scientists. Stephen Toulmin, a science historian, has written recently that the interdisciplinary sciences like anthropology and ecology are now held in high regard by scientists precisely because they are interdisciplinary, because they attempt to study a complex system as a whole and not break it into isolated components as physicists for so many centuries did.

In this type of world, those involved with governance should in one respect feel much more at home. For in many respects this is a fuzzy world, somewhat out of focus, less predictable than before. In other respects it is the governors that must adapt; it is they who must accept that truth and understanding and effectiveness depend now upon wholeness and completeness, not upon fragmentation and simplicity. Humanity, no less than the physical universe, is organized into complex systems. Governance, to be effective, must acknowledge and reflect that complexity.

This, of course, has long been well understood by the wisest and the most effective of political leaders. (It was what Bismarck meant when he characterized politics as "the art of the possible". It was what Winston Churchill meant when he said that "history is just one damn thing after another.") This understanding is the daily experience, too, of those who, like you, are engaged at the central agencies of government. Yet all too broadly, your understanding and your efforts are challenged and rebuffed by colleagues who still believe the norm to be orderliness, finiteness and predictability. So long as those views are held, and certainly so long as they remain preponderant, so long will governance become less and less effective.

What are the challenges facing government today? They fall, broadly in my judgement, into two categories. The first is the accommodation of human activity to the natural constraints of the planetary biosphere. The second is the management of a pluralistic global society. Neither of these can be dealt with in isolation from the other, of course. More importantly, neither of these categories permits issues and problems to be dealt with in isolation. If our human reach is limited, as it is, and our human understanding less than perfect, as it must be, our response as individuals and governments must be one of more - not less - humility.

In some sectors the outer limits of this awareness are now being reached. International commerce in goods and services, intellectual property, and financial instruments are beyond the ability of any single government to regulate and manage. If cooperation is not forthcoming from any one government, then those activities will simply go elsewhere. The environment is not susceptible of limitless abuse nor is it divided by national frontiers. Yet all-too-often, governments appear reluctant to admit that only the human species is so arrogant and so stupid as to believe that it can despoil its own habitat. Primitive animals, by instinct, know better. Security, be it described in military, cultural, or political terms, is no longer within the reach of any single government, if indeed it ever was. The

potent combination of powerful weapons systems now readily obtainable, the fury of communal groups denied equitable treatment and a sense of dignity, the hypnotic attraction of ideas and practices projected worldwide by multi-media technologies, the insidious infection of communicable diseases such as AIDS and infectious practices such as narcotics trafficking - these demand of government novelty, stamina, sacrifice, and cooperation in generous proportions.

One hundred and one years ago, Lord Acton wrote "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." He was right, as the inevitable decay and destruction of every authoritarian regime everywhere has proved. Much more recently, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau added the modern counterpart. "Absence of power tends to corrupt", he said, "and the absolute absence corrupts absolutely." The truth of this statement is found in the lower echelons of every government bureaucracy in the world. At those levels there is for the individuals themselves no recognition, no authority, little compensation. All that remains is the opportunity to be obstructive, to delay, to harass. It's a universal phenomenon, seen in the sullen demeanour of a state employee in a Moscow food store, in the attitude of a junior clerk in government departments worldwide, in the discourtesy and general inefficiency of airport security guards - perhaps the best modern

example of underpaid, under-educated and under-trained martinets. Each time I pass through these checks, I grieve that Franz Kafka is not alive to record their absurdities.

If governments are to respond adequately to the challenges of today and tomorrow, they must reject some of the false conventional wisdom that has circulated routinely for centuries. One example of these is that wars can be won; another is that rulers are smarter than their subjects; a third is that governments can be omnipotent. Today there are modern variations of these absurdities: e.g., (a) political ideology has no relationship to human hatred; (b) nuclear weapons are militarily useful; (c) the tolerance levels to pollution of the oceans and the atmosphere are infinite; (d) the carrying capacity of the planet is fully elastic. In an age which demands a high standard of ethical conduct, ethics in government are all too often denigrated by power-brokers who claim only to be realists; persons who deny and reject scientific absolutes as if they were unproved hypotheses. In the last few years of the 20th century, our margin for error cannot tolerate latter day versions of Ghengis Khan and Adolf Hitler.

Happily, change is evident, sometimes from the least expected source. The New York Times last Thursday carried the following quotation: "The preservation of the secrecy cult in

political practice and political thinking is a way of supporting faith in the infallibility of bureaucratic thinking and a chance for power to be used irresponsibly and uncontrollably in the narrow interests of small groups of people." Who said that? One Vladimir A. Rubanov, a department head at the KGB institute in Moscow, writing in the September issue of the journal "Kommunist".

Perhaps, plus ça change, plus ce n'est pas la même chose.

Is it possible for governments to respond to the massive changes demanded of them, even when there is no clear or accepted blueprint of the new structures and processes? I frankly don't know. I watch countries in the North benefit by the tens of billions of dollars in net financial transfers from the South, yet be ignorant that that is happening. I watch industries and communities everywhere denying that they are polluting their environments even in the face of incontrovertible evidence to the contrary. I watch governments which are incapable of controlling dissidents and terrorists nevertheless acquiring and disseminating broadly weapons and weapons systems which are turned upon them and upon their friends. I watch non-representative regimes clinging to power through force or deceit until, as in Burma, virtually the entire population rises up in

protest. Even as the margins of error become ever more narrow, even as the ability to reverse error diminishes, the initial reaction of governments everywhere is to demonstrate ever greater authority and emphasize all the more the policies of failure.

Whatever our confidence level, we as individuals have no alternative but to try to avoid apocalypse both nuclear and environmental, to try to respond to the desire of peoples everywhere to live lives of decency and dignity, to admit - whatever our religious beliefs - that neither we nor our distant predecessors have been the recipients of universal revealed truth.

This is a tough challenge for governments - to admit that they are not omnipotent, to reveal - as Julius Nyerere did in his brutally honest address to the OAU last spring - that most of our miseries are self-inflicted, to acknowledge that the wisdom of the masses is the essential ingredient in sustained, stable societies. How many of us as individuals are prepared within our own organizational structures to be more pluralistic, more consultative, more coherent, more consensual?

The principles of quantum physics will be of help in this process. What is infinite is the possibility of accomplishment. What is real is that individuals are

participants, not observers. What is absolute is that wholeness, not fragmentation, is the norm as well as the normative.

I prefer to believe, Mr. Chairman, that the present is not for despair, but for excitement. Is there one among us who does not envy the ferment and the opportunity that prevailed in the 18th century? Is there one of us who does not admire the close collaboration in practical activities of John Locke the philosopher and Isaac Newton the scientist? (In 1696, for example, they collaborated to introduce into England a new system of coinage.) If that is so, and I believe it is, then now is the new age of equal opportunity, and the challenge is ours. If humankind is able to survive the next two centuries, a very large 'if' in my judgement, then future historians will acknowledge that we did not fail.